

Liberation Art of Palestine

By G. Dunkel

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So much of art in the imperialist countries is sterile, self-indulgent commodities to decorate the homes of rich patrons or provide them with another avenue for investing their money when stocks are falling.

Art in Palestine, however, is part of the liberation struggle. Samia A. Halaby in her book "Liberation Art of Palestine" puts this art in context, explains its symbols, development and historical roots, and gives important insights into one of the conflicts shaking the world today.

Creative artists--either in occupied Palestine, Gaza and the West Bank, or in refugee centers in countries like Jordan, Lebanon and Syria--face immense practical problems. Hannah Safieh, one of Palestine's leading photographers, had most of his equipment and significant negatives stolen by Israeli soldiers in the 1948 war. In the 1967 war, his studio in Jerusalem was looted.

On July 2, 1982, Israeli planes bombed the Museum of Solidarity with Palestine in the Shatila refugee camp, which previously had held a very successful and warmly received exhibition. Much of the art in the museum was destroyed. In September of that year, Israeli forces instigated a massacre at Shatila and the neighboring Sabra camp.

Mustafa Al Hallaj, one of Palestine's most famous graphic artists, lost 25,000 of his prints in the Israeli attacks on Beirut but managed to save the wood and masonry cuts he used to make them.

A number of painters, like Fathi Ghaban, have done time in Israeli jails for including the colors of the Palestinian flag--not a depiction of the flag itself--in their art.

Material conditions sometimes made traditional art materials hard to find, so artists turned to using bits of exploded shell casings, leather and parts of houses destroyed by the Israeli army in their compositions.

Still, for all the repression and attacks, Palestinian artists persisted. Abdul Rahman Al Mozayen is a fighter as well as an artist, who practiced his art both in Lebanon and during the first Intifada. He explained the connection between the Palestinian people and their artists, saying, "When we draw the tragedies we experience, we must not depress our people. We must help them to recover and renew their resolve to fight for liberation."

Halaby focuses her book on two broad movements of Palestinian art. One grew up in the liberation movement in Lebanon during the 1970s and the other drew its impulse from the first Intifada. She puts them in their Arab context, since the Palestinians are an Arab people, and shows their relation to the visual forms produced by Cubism, Futurism, Constructivism and the Mexican mural tradition, all of which reflect a revolutionary base.

The use of certain symbols in Palestinian art--the cactus, the eye, the horse, the mother--is explained by Halaby in clear and illuminating detail. Full-color plates in the back of the book represent the work of many of the artists discussed, who are carefully put in their cultural and political context.

The whole point of this book is to illustrate and explain that the true art of Palestine "rests on the Palestinian struggle for liberation."

Samia A. Halaby's life and courage are reflected in this book. She was born in Jerusalem, Palestine, in 1936. In 1948, Israeli aggression forced her family to move to Beirut, Lebanon. From there her family emigrated to the United States.

After formal training in American universities, she taught art for 18 years, ending with 10 years at the Yale School of Art. Her work has been exhibited internationally and is in many museum collections--among them the Guggenheim in New York, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris.

She is active with Al-Awda NY-NJ, the Al-Jisser Working Group and the Defend Palestine Committee. Not just active. On Sept. 23, 2001, the day that New York officials were holding a memorial service in Yankee Stadium for the victims of 9/11, Halaby helped organize and served as a spokesperson for a meeting in solidarity with the Muslims in the United States.

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